

## Motivating Ideas

The primary goal of the work I have created over the course of my honors thesis is to explore the fallacy of “digital dualism.” Digital dualism, a phrase coined by researcher and social media theorist Nathan Jurgenson, is the idea that the “digital world is ‘virtual’ while the physical world is ‘real’” (“Digital Dualism versus Augmented Reality” 1). I would argue instead that “digital and material realities...co-construct each other” (“Towards Theorizing an Augmented Reality” 2). The digital and physical worlds in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are inextricably linked – what goes on online can have profound “real-world” implications, and vice-versa.

The two implications that I have focused on in my work this semester are digital privacy and the portrayal of underrepresented groups in media. My work *#3B5998* seeks to visually represent the real world, human impact of online privacy violation and explores issues of manipulation and color psychology as it relates to the social network site Facebook. *Selfrepresentation* explores identity in the digital age and challenges how underrepresented groups are often portrayed in mass media; this piece also explores the political possibilities of online self-representation and deals with politics, agency, and the evolving language of the internet.

### **#3B5998**

*#3B5998* is a large-scale photo collage, originally installed at 90 inches by 16.5 feet. The installation consists of 689 four inch by four inch photographs laid out in a grid. Each photo represents one thousand of the 689,003 people whose newsfeeds were altered in an emotional response experiment to which they did not consent (Vindu).

During one week in January of 2012, Facebook changed the number of positive and negative news stories that the randomly-selected group of over six hundred thousand users saw on their Facebook newsfeeds (Kramer). The study, initiated by Facebook’s researchers, sought to determine if the users’ posts would reflect the positivity or negativity of the stories that they were subjected to. The

company did not “ask for explicit permission from those it selected for the experiment” (Vindu 2). Inder Verma, the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences Editor-in-Chief, stated that even though the researchers claimed that all Facebook users gave blanket consent to the research as a condition of using the service, “it is...a matter of concern that the collection of the data by Facebook may have involved practices that were not fully consistent with the principles of obtaining informed consent and allowing participants to opt out” (Kramer 8788). The experiment revealed that the mood of users’ status updates tended to correlate with the positivity or negativity of the stories they saw on their individual news feeds. There was a lot of negative outcry after this experiment came to light; many users took to Twitter, Facebook and their blogs to protest the actions of the researchers (Vindu). Lauren Weinstein, a privacy activist, said, “I wonder if Facebook killed anyone with their emotion manipulation stunt. At their scale and with depressed people out there, it’s possible,” in her June 2014 Twitter post. Yet, there are more Facebook users now than ever before.

To communicate the scale of this event, I arranged the 689 photographs into a grid, grouping similar images together. The photos were then attached to foam board and mounted on a wall, covering the wall nearly from floor to ceiling and stretching for over 16 feet. This field of blue is intended to be physically overwhelming, both dwarfing the viewer and also drawing them in to inspect the individual photographs.

I used software to comb through a creative commons image database (namely, Flickr) and find images that contained Facebook’s exact shade of blue. The title of the piece, *#3B5998*, corresponds to the value of Facebook’s blue in hexadecimal, a system of color encoding used primarily online. While there were some outliers, the photographs that contain the particular value of blue were mostly calming images of sky skies, seas, snow, ice, water, and clouds. The content of these photographs relates to the idea of color psychology and provides visual proof of the subconscious associations we have with color.

Color psychology, the study of color as a determinant of human behavior, is a vital component of any company's branding. Advertisers and marketers have found that color plays a profound role in influencing the public's spending habits. One study showed that up to 90% of snap judgements made about products come from color (Singh). According to the 2006 study, "prudent use of colors can contribute not only to differentiating products from competitors, but also to influencing moods and feelings – positively or negatively – and therefore, to attitude towards certain products" (Singh 2).

While color connotations vary by culture, in the west, blue is generally associated with peace, loyalty, calmness, security, and dependability. One 2012 study, initiated by Lauren I. Labrecque & George R. Milne, sought to verify these associations scientifically. They altered only the hue of a logo created for the experiment and showed the different color variations to a selection of undergraduates. Labrecque and Milne found that "the perceived competence of a brand is positively affected by the presence of blue" (715). They found that "blue is linked to competence, as it is associated with intelligence, communication, trust, efficiency, duty, and logic...it is also seen as a secure color" (717). This suggests that Facebook's blue is an obvious, yet ironic, choice for a large social media company that makes money selling users' likes, personal demographic information, and preferences to advertisers. This work thus critiques online manipulation and the subtle yet very real control that massive companies such as Facebook have over their users.

### **SelfieRepresentation**

*SelfieRepresentation* is a dual work – one part exists online as the SelfieRepresentation website; the other is a series of portraits based on the selfies submitted to the website. Each component of this work serves to address and critique traditional media representation and the conventions of selfies. Just as the aesthetics of selfies and Instagram inform the creation of the portraits, the process and results of the portraits interact with and undermine the expectations of the website.

I argue that, rather than being frivolous displays of narcissism, selfies can actually be thought of as a form of anti-sexist, anti-racist protest. Traditional media, defined as television, advertising, magazines, and movies, have a history of being very one-dimensional in terms of representation. Traditional media is white, cisgendered, heterosexual, heteronormative, and middle-class. It displays a profound lack of diversity – not only are minorities not often represented in traditional media, but when they are shown, they are stereotyped, made fun of, and flat in terms of characterization. The character is defined by his or her minority identity and little more.

I argue that social media, and in particular selfies, have the potential to take back control from traditional media by increasing the amount of exposure of minority faces; in this way, selfies can be political and also a form of activism. There is evidence to suggest that people often use the pictures of themselves uploaded to social networks to construct their own identity, especially in regards to gender (Bryant). While internet users can reinforce gender stereotypes in the images they choose to share of themselves, I argue that they can also challenge them. In this way, not every selfie is a form of activism, but selfie-taking can be a tool to democratically demonstrate diversity.

Before the popularity of social media, the variety of people you saw in your life was limited. You saw your family, friends and neighbors who were most likely similar to you, and beyond that, the other faces you saw were disseminated by traditional media. By taking a photo of oneself and putting it online, hundreds or even thousands of people will actually see and engage with that image. Selfies can be an opportunity for underrepresented groups to exercise their own agency. Selfies are not authentic, in that they are often posed, curated, filtered, and tweaked with Instagram's editing features; however, it is through these choices that underrepresented groups can take control over how their image is created and shared – control that once belonged solely to the gatekeepers of traditional media. It is an act of agency.

What makes a selfie a selfie and not just a picture of yourself is the dissemination – it is not just that you have taken a picture of yourself; it is that you have taken a picture of yourself and put it out onto the internet. A selfie is a claim to one's own identity. Selfies thus contribute to the stream of images that we are inundated with daily, providing a counterbalance to traditional media's homogeneity. On an individual's facebook feed for example, one will see an advertisement from a big agency, but one will also see a photo your friend liked. In online spaces, these can take up equal space. Seeing a variety of people, especially people who look like you, is crucial to one's self-esteem.

A 2011 study on media representation by Nicole Martins and Kristen Harrison is central to my work. After surveying a group of about 400 young students for over a year, the study showed that for white girls, black girls and black boys, increased exposure to television worsened their self-esteem. Only white boys' self-esteem was bolstered by the media. The study suggests that the difference in self-esteem comes about because of how the different groups tend to be portrayed on television. According to Martins, "If you are a girl or a woman, what you see is that women on television are not given a variety of roles. The roles that they see...are almost always one-dimensional and focused on the success they have because of how they look, not what they do or what they think or how they got there" ("TV Can Decrease" 2). When it comes to people of color, "young black boys are getting the...message that there is not lots of good things that you can aspire to" ("TV Can Decrease" 3). I believe that increasing the diversity of people represented in media and showing a broader, less stereotypical form of representation will change how people view themselves for the better.

In response to this issue of representation, I have created [www.selfierepresentation.com](http://www.selfierepresentation.com). The website is designed to emulate Instagram's desktop site in simplicity, color scheme, and page design. The photographs, as well as in-progress shots and gifs showing footage of the painting process, are displayed in a single column like on Instagram. I have asked people to submit selfies to me via a

submission page on the selfrepresentation website. If a submitter answers yes to the question, “Do you believe that the media misrepresents you or represents you in a one-dimensional way,” then he or she falls within the scope of the project. This allows for self-selection – those who submit images will be mostly people who care about media representation; thus, their act of contributing to the project is a small act of activism. The titles of each of these selfies are left up to the submitter. I ask that each post include a name, but the description of the identity and the misrepresentation is left up to the submitter; this is another way for the photographers to express their agency as each title will be put on the website as-is. In addition to the submitted selfies, the website will contain animated gifs of my process of transforming these selfies into painted portraits. The stop-motion gifs, which transform hours of labor into a few seconds, reflects the dichotomy between the digital quickness of a selfie and the slow, analog work of a painting. These gifs emphasize the labor that goes into each painting, which reinforces the elevation of my subject matter.

I argue that the selfie should be considered within a larger framework of art history. They are a continuation of a long art historical tradition of self-portraiture. I have painted a selection of these selfies which will mix the aesthetics of traditional portraiture and selfies – this blurs the lines between high and low art representation and critiques the idea of who is worthy of having their portrait painted. Portrait painting has the connotation of being a medium of the wealthy and powerful; thus, portrait painting itself adds visual weight, grandness, and history to its subject. As painting gave way to film photography and film photography to digital, more people could take and share their own image. Yet, the idea of the painted portrait still feels exclusive. By conflating the two, it critiques the norms of representation in both traditional portraiture and relates it to the ever-present issues of modern media representation.

While the faces of the painted portraits closely reflect the submitted selfies, the clothing, posing, and background are taken from a portrait of a person from the past whose life included activism. I chose people who were not exclusively activists, but who, in the course of living their lives, stood up for a cause in one way or another. The past people and their causes are chosen to reflect the selfie submitter's identity. For example, the painting of "Jake," whose submitted description reads "Jake, a non-gendered person who couldn't care less about appearing 'manly,'" takes its clothing and pose from a portrait of Magnus Hirschfeld, a German physician and early gay and transgender rights activist. By conflating the two individuals, I am connecting the selfie-taker's act against the media's homogeneity (submitting their own image to a database of democratic diversity) to a larger history of representation, activism, and oppression.

The tags that I have attached to each image critique the language of selfie hashtags, particularly on Instagram. Instagram users will often use a series of short tags on their image so that other users find their image and gain a wider viewership. For example, a certain lesbian-focused selfie account will use the hashtags #tomboy, #tomboylookbook, #tomboyfashion, #tomboylook, #androgyny, #androgynous, #androgyne, #lesbianstyle, #lesbian, #lgbt, and #noh8, all on one image.<sup>1</sup> I feel that undermining this tagging convention in my own site is another way to critique the one-dimensional representation in traditional media. Therefore, the tags I have chosen for each painting actually refer to the art historical reference; they also serve to subtly identify the reference and integrate their life and activism into the digital realm.

### **Larger Context**

My series of paintings is rooted in contemporary art history, much of which has been concerned with undermining the connotations and conventions of painting or using these conventions in such a

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<sup>1</sup> From the Tomboy Lookbook Instagram account: <https://instagram.com/p/0l0pCKQTb7/?taken-by=tomboylookbook>

way as to provide a critique. I consider Gerard Richter's work as an influence on my work. Richter created oil paintings that were replicas of photographs, including the aberrations, blurriness and artifacts of the medium. He explored the dichotomy of high and low imagery by creating these laborious paintings based on images taken from newspaper clippings of celebrities (Figure 1) or photographs of mundane items like a roll of toilet paper (Figure 2). I similarly use the act of painting as a way to both elevate my subjects and connect them to a larger continuum of art history.

My work this year has also been influenced by several 21<sup>st</sup>-century artists as well, including Ken Solomon, Lev Manovich, Josh Begley, and Evan Roth.

Ken Solomon's work is concerned with the intersection of the aesthetics of painting and the digital world. I am particularly interested in his Google portrait series, which depicts the Google image results when one searches for "Lichtenstein." (Figure 3). These large-scale, painstaking watercolors seek to freeze an ever-changing digital landscape. According to Solomon, his work turns "pixels to paint, fast to slow, transforming functional into formal, data and information into a visual world" (1). Another of Solomon's painting series is the *Running to Stand Still* series, which catalogues one hundred Pandora screens. Each watercolor painting, the first depicting his iPhone screen at 12:00 noon and 100% battery, shows a series of screens as his Pandora app goes through one hundred songs, with the last word of each song's title becoming the first word of the next title (Figure 4). Solomon's paintings seek to bring a painterly aesthetic to a digital subject matter, emphasizing the formal qualities of the screens he references and making ephemeral digital images into something more permanent.

Lev Manovich is a multidisciplinary artist who thinks of himself as "an artist who is painting with data" (Manovich.net 1). His work deals with cultural data visualization: how to best show a traceable human phenomenon visually. Two works, *The Exceptional and the Everyday: 144 in Kiev* and *Selfiecity*, are closely related to my own areas of interest. The first project tracks the Instagram photos posted in



and around Kiev from February 17 to 22, 2014, during the Ukrainian revolution (Figure 5). While other researchers and journalists focused on quantitative measures of social media posts, Manovich sought to create a visual representation of what people were posting during the uprising. He used open source and custom software to sift through thousands of Instagram images, creating a grid of images that show a huge range of activities, from police clashes and demonstrations to more mundane images of normal life. While the media tends to focus on the more dramatic events that they can capture with film crews, this method presents a more democratic and, in a way, more realistic depiction of what went on during the revolution. The idea of giving everyday people agency over how their lives are depicted to the rest of the world via social media is a theme that is reflected in my own work.

Manovich also created a series that is directly related to the phenomenon of selfies (self-portraits usually taken with one's own cell phone). His *Selfiecity* series analyzed 3200 selfies in five cities and tracked the similarities and differences in pose, age, gender, and mood, among other variables (Figure 6). Based on this analysis, Manovich and his team presented both findings and a site where one can browse through the images, sorting by the different parameters. Manovich found that the estimated median age for the selfie takers was 23.7, that Moscow had the highest percentage of women selfie takers, and that Bangkok selfies featured the highest average amount of smiles ("Selfiecity: Findings" 2).

Manovich takes an approach that is both research and art related; I find work that can relate to the world in a specific, quantifiable way very powerful, as it can demonstrate dry statistics in an engaging, thoughtful manner.

Josh Begley is an app developer and data artist; the work of his that I'm most interested in is his *Prison Map* series, which uses the Google Maps API and custom code to find and screenshot each of the 4916 prison facilities in the United States based on latitude and longitude (Figure 7).

According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2,266,800 adults were incarcerated in U.S. federal and state prisons, and county jails as of 2011. While 4.4% of the world's population resides in the United States, it houses around 22 percent of the world's prisoners (Walmsley 12). By simply allowing users to browse through a visual database of the facilities, it makes astonishing and almost incomprehensibly large statistics about the U.S. prison population all the more real. In the same way, I hope that allowing my viewers to see a more democratic representation of diversity will bring the media-influenced version they experience every day to be all the more evident.

Finally, Evan Roth is a Paris-based American artist whose practice “visualizes and archives culture through unintended uses of technologies” (1). His *Internet Cache Self Portrait* series, which consists of long, draping prints that contain a day's worth of images that are passively collected during normal internet use, is particularly interesting as it explores the breadth of information that browsing the internet reveals about us while also demonstrating its shallowness, as well as highlighting how one's online identity is put together through internet usage (Figure 8).

Through my honors thesis work, I have worked to demonstrate that events that occur in the digital world can have real, human impact on the physical world. The information gathered about people online can be used to manipulate one's emotions in subtle, yet real and measurable ways. What we communicate about ourselves online, especially in regards to our own identities, can affect how others feel about themselves personally and how they feel about underrepresented groups. To mentally separate oneself into a “real” self and an “online” self is to deny how strongly the internet and social media can influence one's thoughts, feelings and opinions.

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**Figure 1**

Gerard Richter

*Woman Descending the Staircase (Frau die Treppe herabgehend)*, 1965

Oil on canvas

198 x 128 cm



**Figure 2**

Gerard Richter

*Toilet Paper (Klorolle)*, 1965

Oil on canvas

70 cm x 65 cm





**Figure 4**

Ken Solomon

*Running to Stand Still, 2012*

Watercolor, installation view and details

*100 3"x2" portraits*



**Figure 5**

Lev Manovich

*The Exceptional and the Everyday: 144 hours in Kiev*

Digital collage and detail

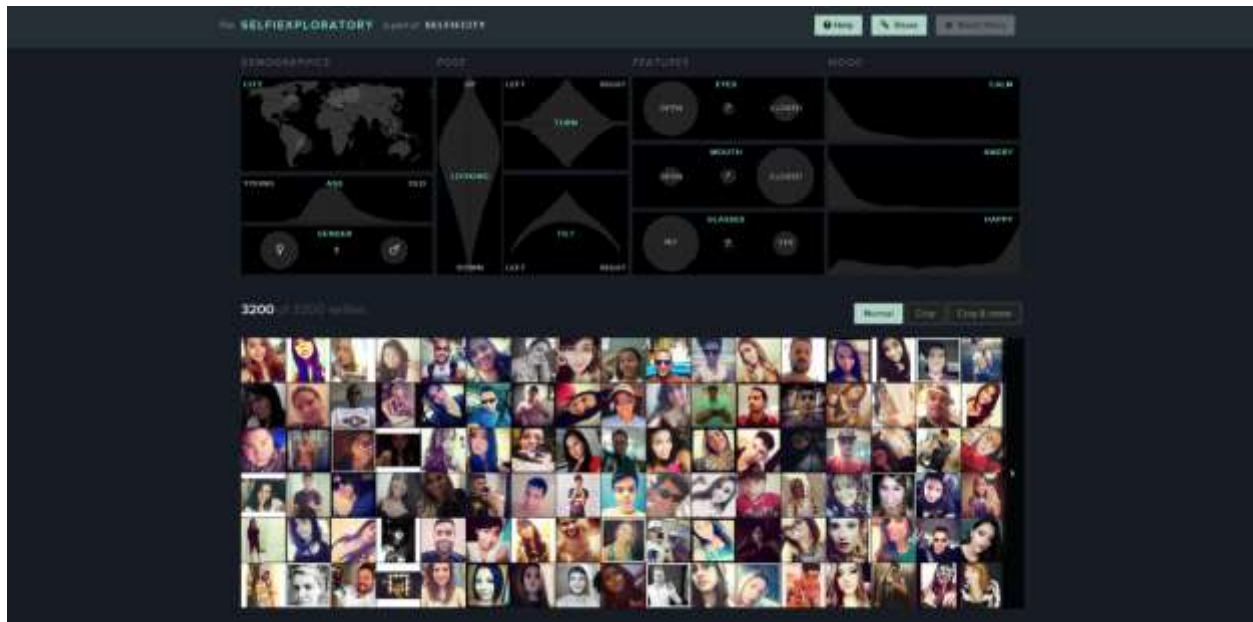


Figure 6

Lev Manovich

*Selfexploratory, a Part of SelfieCity*

Website screenshot



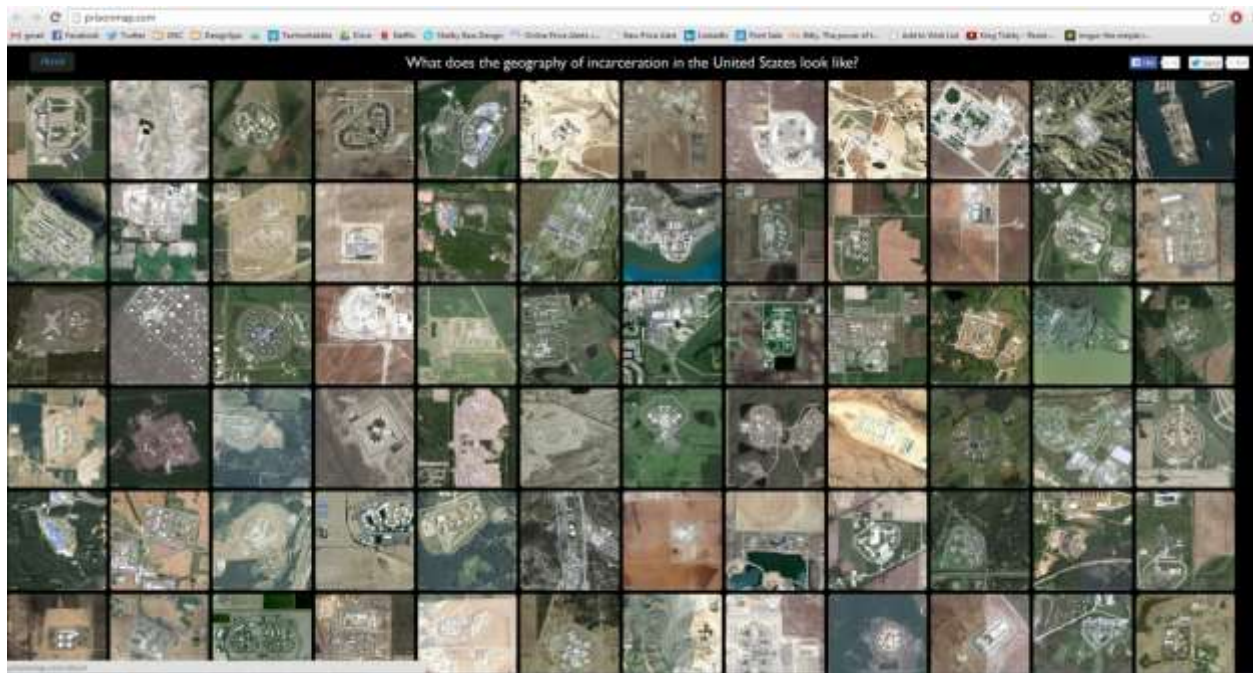


Figure 7

Josh Begley

*Prison Map*

Screenshot of website



**Figure 8**

Evan Roth

*Internet Cache Self Portrait series, 2014*

Lambda and vinyl prints

Size variable

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